life *without* landlords

mike davidow

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Davidow was born in Russia in 1913 and came to the United States at the age of 4. He joined the Young Communist League in 1932 and has been active in the Communist Party for 40 years. During the 1930s he led many demonstrations and other struggles against unemployment and evictions. In the 1940s and 50s he was a leader of the Communist Party in Ohio and in New York. He served in the infantry in World War II and has worked as a presser in a garment shop. He is the author of a number of plays.

From 1961 to 1969 Mike Davidow was the writer on New York and on political news for The Worker and its successor, the Daily World. From 1969 to 1972 he was the Daily World's Moscow correspondent. During this time he visited 14 of the 15 Republics of the USSR and wrote extensively on all aspects of Soviet life. He has written many articles for publications in the socialist countries as well as for the Daily World. He visited the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1969 and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1970, and reported on both visits in the Daily World.

This pamphlet is a chapter from a book which Mike Davidow is now writing, which will contrast life in Soviet and U.S. cities, particularly Moscow and New York, and show why cities in the Soviet Union are free of the crises which affect cities in the United States.

Photos--cover and page 19--new apartment houses in the Southwest part of Moscow (Novosti Press Agency).

ISBN 0-87898-100-4

Published by

NEW OUTLOOK PUBLISHERS

205 West 19 Street • 9th Floor • New York, N.Y. 10011

209

May 1973

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

Big-City Life: New York and Moscow

We had not lived in the Soviet Union very long when it suddenly occurred to us: we had completely forgotten about a very important person in our lives--our landlord. The first of the month held no terror for us here. At home the landlord was everyone's first concern. You gave him his cut--30 per cent or more of your monthly income --and then you turned to your other worries: the utility monopolies which sliced off $20 a month or more for gas and electricity, and another $25 average for telephone, then there were doctor bills, insurance payments, college tuition for your children.

Those who make it their business to protest the denial of individual rights of Soviet citizens can put this abrogated right on top of their list: Soviet citizens are denied the right to worry about landlords. Moreover, our defenders of the rights of individuals can speak out against another curtailment of the individual's rights: the denial of the right of existence of landlords.

As one who long suffered from such "rights," let me tell you that one of our greatest pleasures in our four years of living here has come from our acceptance of the first of the month as just another day. And I am convinced that one of the chief contributing factors toward making Soviet cities places without exploding tensions is the fact that their inhabitants are free of landlord worries.

What is it, after all, that makes a city tense? It basically can be traced to the question: what is it that makes its citizens worry? Americans who walk our cities' streets are bundles of worries. They worry about their landlords. They worry about getting or keeping a job. They worry about the calamity that would strike them should they get sick, and when serious illness strikes they worry about paying the doctor and the hospital and about losing their jobs. They worry about walk-

ing the streets at night. They worry about their youth getting sucked into the expanding whirlpool of drug addiction. (These are by no means a complete list of the worries.) And if they are Black, Puerto Rican, Chicano, Indian, Asian, then not only are all these worries considerably magnified, but to them are added the daily humiliation and the economic and social barriers of racism.

Soviet people, and Soviet city dwellers too, have their worries--but these are not among them. Socialism, though it has freed people from most of the deadly social and economic worries that beset citizens of our "free" world, has far from eliminated personal unhappiness and tragedies. Personal worries of people--resulting from problems of love, marriage, sickness, etc.--have not been eliminated. They just exist in a society that does not aggravate and complicate them and does its best to minimize and overcome them. Communism will, of course, greatly extend man's capacity for happiness. But those who look to a social system, even the most advanced and most human in mankind's history, to do away with all personal unhappiness, are seeking a Utopia. This has never been claimed for socialism and communism by either the founders of scientific socialism or the leaders of the Soviet Union. The social worries which Soviet people face arise largely from unresolved problems that still exist in Soviet society in the period of socialism, complicated, as I indicated, by the aftereffects of World War II.

Among them is still the serious housing shortage. But, there is this big difference, even in respect to these social worries: Soviet people know that these are temporary worries. This knowledge is based not on blind faith or self-delusion but on solid reality--solid achievements. This is hardly the outlook our urban dwellers can have. Let me just illustrate it with this one fact. The New York Times (June 5, 1969) notes that, at

the present rate of public housing construction of homes which people of low income could afford in the U.S., such families "could expect to move into a project in 51 years." It points out: "To solve this problem, New York City needs right now 780,000 new subsidized apartments, but the Federal housing program, in its 34-year history, has produced only 800,000 units across the entire country" (about 27,000 units a year. My emphasis--M.D.). By contrast, Soviet citizens know that their government constructed 11,350,000 new or improved apartments in the five year period 1966-70, about 2.3 million a year. They know that in the 9th Five Year Plan, 1971-75, another 14 million will be built. And Muscovites know that every year 120,000 more apartments will be added to Moscow's housing supply. Thus, though many Soviet citizens know that they still have to wait a few years for a new apartment, they have no doubt that one will be theirs as soon as possible. And they know that everything possible is being done by their government to speed the day. And what is most important, Soviet citizens know that homes will be constructed for those who need them and not for those who can afford to pay most for them. They know that homes are built for people, not for profit.

There is large-scale housing construction in the U.S. too. The entire world recognizes the tremendous productive capacity of our extremely skilled and hard-working construction workers. In the 1966-70 period, the yearly rate of apartment building in the U.S. was 1.4 million units a year (as against 2.3 million in the Soviet Union). It was considerably below the Soviet rate but still a high rate. But what makes the contrast between Soviet and U.S. apartment building even more meaningful is the answer to the question: for whom are apartments being built? Take New York as an example. Here is how the New York Times, in its article titled The Changing City:

Housing Paralysis (June 5, 1969), describes the situation: "The state of housing in New York seems as hopeless as an abandoned tenement whose broken windows stare blankly out on a slum." But for whom are homes being built? "Private industry is building apartments for only the wealthiest, 7 per cent of the population, except in cases where it receives government subsidies." The significance of what private industry does hits home when it is realized, as the New York Times points out for New York, that: "Private industry has built and owns 92 per cent of the city's 2.8 million residential units without government subsidies." And the Times adds: "But privately financed apartment houses are now going up only in the most prestigious neighborhoods, such as Manhattan's East Side, and monthly rents are in the range of $100 to $150 a room." (This rental rate has since risen--M. D.)

Housing for the People

The building of homes is regarded as one of the main duties of a socialist society. To place such a vital social need in the hands of those who would use it as a means of extracting profits and high rents, and who would determine who shall and shall not have homes by that inhuman self-seeking yardstick, would be regarded as the height of irrationality by any Soviet citizen. The construction of housing in the Soviet Union is one of the chief functions of Soviet government on every level. I will describe later on how this is organized and give some of the background of its historical development. Here, let me just note the following.

I said earlier that Soviet citizens have no rent worries. This is not only because they have no landlords, but also because they pay almost no rent. In my opinion, 4 per cent of one's income, or less, comes very close to that. U.S. rent pay-

ers would laugh at Soviet rents. Take our family, for example. When we left New York, we were paying $150 a month rent--not too high by U.S. standards. But when my wife, Gail, visited our apartment in the Bronx, in May, 1972, the rent had gone up to $235.00 a month. By contrast, our rent in Moscow has remained stable in the past four years. It's a stable 18 rubles and 36 kopecks a month! (This is about $22.00 at the official exchange rate.) We have three large rooms (they don't count the kitchen as a room here) with all modern conveniences. I have before me our rent book. Here is how it breaks down: 12 rubles, 32 kopecks for the apartment itself; 4 rubles, 19 kopecks for heat (all apartments are centrally heated); one ruble, 20 kopecks for water and sewage; 50 kopecks for the radio; 15 kopecks for the TV antenna. And in comparison with our friends ours is a higher than average rent.

As for our utilities: for gas the average monthly charge is now 22 kopecks per person. (It was recently reduced from 32 kopecks--who in our country can remember their last utility reduction?) Electricity is a little higher, about 4 or 5 rubles a month in winter and about 3 rubles in summer. We pay 2 rubles 50 kopecks a month for a telephone, for unlimited local calls.

I itemize all this to make the point that unlike in our country, the rent charge does not determine who gets a decent apartment. Who can't afford to pay these rents?

What, then, determines how apartments are distributed in the Soviet Union? It should be noted that because of the serious housing shortage that still exists (I'll deal later with this question), the question of how apartments are distributed is very clearly delineated and strictly enforced in public view. The cardinal rule determining the distribution of housing here is need, not income. Only in cooperative housing (about 6 to 7 per cent of housing construction in Moscow) is income an im-

portant factor, and even here it is negligible compared to U.S. standards.

Here is how it works. Persons with the greatest need get preference in the distribution of housing. Those with less than five square meters (about 50 square feet) per person in housing space (it was three meters before 1969), the minimum prescribed by law, are given first priority. Special consideration is given to war invalids, sick people, disabled workers, large families, and Heroes of Labor. Families living in very old, substandard houses are also given preference. Exemplary workers are also accorded preferential treatment by their unions in the distribution of new apartments built with the unions' funds.

State-owned apartments are allocated by special housing committees set up in each of Moscow's 30 local districts. These committees openly consider housing requests and complaints. Allocations are discussed publicly at meetings of the executive committee of the local Soviet (council). The names of everyone receiving new apartments are placed on public wall bulletins. At the beginning of each year, the names of those waiting for apartments are listed on these bulletins in order of priority.

Vast construction programs, particularly during the last 12 years, have considerably reduced the waiting rolls and shortened the waiting period. From 1965 to the present, 840,000 Moscow families (more than half of all families) received new or improved apartments. This is more than the total constructed in the U.S. government's Federal housing program throughout the country during its entire 34-year history!

Moscow, and Soviet cities generally, still have serious housing problems. A sizable number of people still share apartments, and there's still a considerable wait for new apartments. This particularly affects small families and single people. The housing authorities, understand-

ably, first concentrated on meeting the most pressing demand for large flats for families. It is also more expensive to build small apartments. But as the volume of housing construction mounts and housing needs are being met, attention is being increasingly paid to this problem. More small apartments will be built.

The Soviet Union is well on the road to becoming the first country in history to fully solve the housing problem for the people. No social system, past or present, besides socialism, has ever set itself such a goal, let alone demonstrated that it can be done. What this means in respect to resolving the problems of modern cities can hardly be overestimated--for the problem of urban living is first of all the problem of homes. I have often thought: What would be the effect on the lives of the mass of U.S. urban dwellers, especially in the Black, Puerto Rican and Chicano ghettos, if they were truly guaranteed the "security of their homes," if they lived with the realization that they were assured the "comforts of home" as their normal right? And what effect would all this have on reducing the tensions which are ripping our cities apart, in curtailing the alarming annual rise in the crime rate in the face of a constantly expanding police force?

In our country such a question would understandably evoke cynical smiles, especially among ghetto slumdwellers. They are all too familiar with such "pipedreams" fed to them by politicians running for office and projected in countless studies and recommendations (usually after ghetto outbursts) on the crisis of our cities. But, in the Soviet Union, as I have seen with my own eyes, this age-old dream, especially of the working people, is a solid reality for most and will soon be for all.

The Soviet Union is one vast construction site --especially in the cities. And first priority is being given to building adequate housing for the

people. This is so apparent, even to visitors, that A. Allen Bates, director of the Office of Standards Policy of the U.S. Department of Commerce, told a Congressional hearing: "The Soviet Union is the first, and thus far, the only nation which has solved the problem of providing acceptable low cost housing for the mass of its citizens ... In the USSR all housing built in the last 20 years has been deliberately designed as low cost housing. In the United States, no housing built during that period or now designed for future construction can be characterized as low cost housing." And Bates added: "Slums are not profitable under the Russian form of economy." And one may well ask: And why should they be profitable in our country?

In 1971-75 some 14 million apartments will be built--more than the total housing space the Soviet Union had in 1950. This will mean that another 60 million people (in addition to 55 million in 1965-70) will have improved housing. In the 1971-75 period a total of 73.5 billion rubles, 22 per cent more than in the previous five year period, will be spent on housing construction. In comparison, our federal government, which, as Bates indicated, hardly ever got started, is cutting even the meager funds allotted for this purpose.

In making a study of Moscow housing, I met with Nikolai Ullas, deputy head of the capital's Architectural and Planning Department. I posed the question to him: when do you think Moscow's housing problem will be largely solved?

I asked this in the full knowledge of the serious housing problem Moscow and the Soviet Union still face (it is frankly and publicly admitted). How could it be otherwise when one considers the housing situation inherited from the Czars, and the devastation wrought by Nazi destruction? Ullas gave the question serious thought. Solving Moscow's housing problem will mean that the 30

per cent of its people who still share apartments (mostly members of the same family) will move into their own apartments; the still sizable waiting list for new apartments will be largely accommodated and the waiting period reduced to the normal expected in a metropolitan city; and 9 million square meters of old housing (the equivalent of 300,000 apartments) will be eliminated. The latter constitute Moscow's and the Soviet Union's major residue of the substandard housing inherited from Czarist days, largely wooden single family homes. Ullas divided his answer into two parts. In respect to the first two problems, he declared that Moscow's housing problem will be largely solved by 1980 (the end of the 10th Five Year Plan). As regards the last point, the most difficult since it involves dealing with problems linked with private homes, Ullas stated that it would take another five to ten years. Thus, the outlook is that by 1985-90, Moscow will be a city completely without substandard housing. No major city in the capitalist world (certainly not in our country) can look forward to such a future.

I don't know what the definite prospect is for the Soviet Union as a whole. Certainly, special attention in this respect is given to Moscow, which the 24th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union decreed must become the model Communist city. But, from what I have observed, I would hazard the guess that the Soviet Union (given peace) will enter the 21st Century with the housing problem largely solved. No country in the capitalist world (certainly not ours) can envision such a goal.

The Soviet Union can truly boast of a housing miracle--a miracle all the greater when one considers from where it all started.

Here is the housing picture when the young Soviet Republic took over the country from Czarism, only 55 years ago. More than 80 per cent of the urban housing was made up of one and two

story wooden dwellings. Less than 10 per cent of them in the central parts of big cities had running water, less than 3 per cent had sewage and only 5 per cent had electricity. Moscow, the capital of the Czars (notwithstanding its palatial homes for the nobility, rich merchants and capitalists), was a city of incredible slums. More than 325,000 (out of a total population in 1917 of 1,850,000) lived in slums--wooden barracks with 15 persons to a room. And for this kind of housing, rents took 15 to 22 percent of a working family's income. The conditions among the peasant poor in the villages were even worse.

No story more reveals the real humanism of the new social system than the Soviet Union's housing story. Let those who in our country prate so much about their concern for "socialism with a human face" match our housing story with that of the USSR. One of the first acts of the new Soviet state, following the October Revolution (1917), was the taking over of the homes of the rich and transforming them into apartments for the working people. This was done under the decree issued November 8 (one day after the Revolution), On Requisitioning Flats of the Rich to Relieve the Plight of the Poor.

It was such expropriation of the property of the exploiters of the peoples of Czarist Russia that raised a hue and cry among their kindred spirits in our country. No doubt it was not only concern for their kind that motivated this outcry. What if the numerous residences of the Rockefellers spread all over our country were made use of in similar fashion, to provide the slum dwellers of the Harlems with decent housing?

However, even though each exploiter had several apartments and estates, the redistribution hardly made a dent in the abysmal housing situation which the new socialist state inherited. The Soviet Union faced an unprecedented concentration of housing problems. It had to build new

housing almost from the ground up (and underground, since electricity, sewage, water and gas supply were nearly non-existent). It had to construct not only for those who lived in the cities at the time of the Revolution, but also for the millions who were streaming into the cities from the countryside under the impact of the great socialist industrialization program. This program transformed the Soviet Union from a backward agricultural country into an advanced industrial country second only to the U.S., in record time.

In terms of urban problems this meant that between 1926 and 1971 the population of cities increased by more than 110 million (it is now more than 140 million out of a total of 250 million). Then, after it had made substantial progress in urban housing construction (by 1940 housing in the cities had grown almost 150 per cent in comparison with pre-Revolutionary days), the Soviet Union was struck by the Nazi holocaust. No country in history ever suffered as much destruction of life and property as did the Soviet Union in those four war years. 1,710 towns and urban settlements, 70,000 villages, 32,000 industrial enterprises, thousands of medical, educational and cultural establishments were destroyed. Great cities like Kiev, Stalingrad, Minsk, Sevastopol, Odessa, Novgorod, Pskov and Orel were turned into ruins. Heroic Leningrad lost one third (900,000) of its population, and much of the city was severely damaged. Not only were there 20 million war dead, but 25 million people were left homeless.

This was the housing problem the Soviet Union confronted: the inheritance from a backward past, the demands arising from unprecedented industrialization, and the destruction wrought by the most barbaric war machine in history. Never before did a country face such a combination of problems all packed within the space of half a century.

"Free Enterprise" Destroys People's Homes

One can only imagine what the situation would be if our "free enterprise system," with its powerful real estate and landlord interests and a pliant government, faced comparable problems. One does not have to speculate: a look at what has happened to rents in the U.S. in a tight housing situation, and particularly in New York City where 70 per cent of the population are tenants, can give one a good idea. Even New York's rent control law (the last to hold out against unrelenting landlord assaults) offered little protection against the "natural" pressures of "free enterprise."

As a New York reporter for my newspaper, I witnessed the guerrilla warfare conducted by landlords and big real estate interests against tenants in rent controlled buildings in their campaign to undermine and destroy the rent control law. Wielding their landlord power, they punished their tenants by refusing to make necessary repairs, curtailing the supply of heat in winter, allowing rats and roaches to invade their apartments. They organized "tax strikes" to bring pressure on City Hall. Today rent control in New York is a hollow shell. (In 1968, according to the New York Times, the apartment vacancy rate in New York was 1.23 per cent. It is hardly any better now.)

Here is how the New York Times (June 5, 1969) described the impact on New Yorkers of that city's housing situation: "All this adds up to eight million New Yorkers caught in a clash of powerful forces: rising rents and falling rates of vacancy, dwindling amounts of new construction and widespread abandoning of sound old buildings." The latter, particularly, illustrates the inhuman, anti-social depths to which landlordism can bring a great city.

Here is the description by the New York

Times of how, after having milked dry their properties (people's homes--M.D.), landlords discard them like empty tin cans: "Even those who have studied the problem in depth have difficulty fully understanding the social and economic forces that lead to housing deterioration characterized by rat infestation, heatless apartments whose floors are covered with ice in the winter, solid buildings abandoned to narcotics addicts." Noting that an estimated 2-3,000 buildings are abandoned by landlords a year, the Times adds: "As a result, more and more vacant structures are left standing, with a depressing and demoralizing impact on surrounding property and residents. Their infection spreads quickly through whole blocks, until some sections of the city now resemble bombed-out areas of wartime Europe." And, the Times points out, "abandonment is a national problem, even in major cities without rent control. In the slums of Chicago's West Side, for example, structurally sound brick apartment houses are being abandoned by owners who do not regard their investments as worth maintaining." The New York Times neglects to point out that the overwhelming majority of abandoned houses are part of the normal street scene of Black, Puerto Rican and Chicano slums in every large U.S. city. They are the structural background to the depressing, decaying atmosphere that makes life in those ghettos so incredibly unbearable that it triggers off the frustrated outbursts with which the entire world is today familiar. One can truly ask: how much have the great landlords and real estate barons, who boast of their Empire State Buildings, contributed to the crisis of our cities?

Abandoned apartment buildings in the Soviet Union? And landlords who discard them like worn out socks after they get all the wear out of them? I find it strange even to think in such terms here. It is like conjuring up the Middle Ages, like applying the standards of an insane, inhuman world

to a sane and human society. I spoke to Soviet people who told me of the days they lived in abandoned buildings. But that was during or shortly after the war, and those were buildings wrecked by the savagery of the Nazi barbarians. The inhabitants of demolished Minsk told me that they were compelled to live for some years in caves and underground shelters. But never has a single Soviet citizen been denied decent shelter or had the ground literally removed from under his home by the whim of someone who could no longer make a suitable profit out of it. The Soviet Union, as I already indicated, had to confront a far more critical housing situation than we ever did. It still does in some areas, and in particular in many rural regions. It certainly does not compare to us in respect to luxury housing or middle class private homes. It has to catch up with us particularly in respect to plumbing and the finishing touches to apartment construction. But in respect to providing decent homes for the mass of the working people, at rents that they not only can afford, but that are almost minimal (the basic test of housing), there is no comparison.

Socialist Construction of Homes

The story of how the Soviet Union achieved this status is a thrilling one. I'm frankly surprised it has not yet been adequately depicted (to my knowledge) in the Soviet Union on screen or stage or in a novel. The Soviet housing success story is summed up in this: like the hammer and sickle, the building crane in the sky has become the symbol of Soviet power. When I visited Moscow's central construction organization, Abram Isaacovitch Birger, its dynamic chief engineer of the designing bureau, told me: "In our gigantic construction everything depends on the crane." It really does. I've seen cranes with 8-ton capacity lift huge steel-reinforced concrete slabs (making

up a wall of a good sized room) as if they were toys in a child's construction set. The crane is key to Soviet housing construction because buildings in the main are assembled from prefabricated components.

Most construction is done indoors. This not only makes for assembly line production but is extremely important in a country like the Soviet Union where winters are long and severe. Not that building is restrained by winter. Construction is not seasonal as it is in our country--it is a year-round affair. Work in Siberia and the Far North, for example, is only halted when the temperature hits 49 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. Success in housing was made possible because the Soviet Union did for housing construction what the auto industry did for industrial production in the U.S. It put home building on the assembly line; it adopted prefabricated construction.

Unlike in our free enterprise society, where workers are compelled to resist such progress because it spells death to their jobs, this advanced process was enthusiastically welcomed by Soviet building workers who, like all other workers, knew that this meant better homes and had no need to fear unemployment. Thus, whereas in the 1930s, 10-15,000 apartments a year were built by the traditional methods, beginning with 1966-67 this rose to 120,000 annually. Of these, 80-85 per cent are constructed by the prefabricated method. Once the apartments have been "manufactured" it's largely a matter of assembling them. It takes 28 days to assemble a 9 story building containing 144 apartments. Another 12-14 days are required for finishing work. A building of that size under traditional construction methods would take six months to build. The prefabricated method requires 4-4.5 times less labor and saves considerably on the use of raw material.

I visited two factories (in Moscow and Lenin-

grad) where prefabricated units are manufactured on the assembly line. There were two conveyors in the plant, one for production of inside walls and the other for outside walls. A huge concrete mixer poured its mixture into metal frames already containing all the necessary wiring units and pipes for central heating. Thus, most of the electrical and plumbing work was already done. The heating pipes are encased in the walls. This not only saves time and labor but keeps the walls warm. Vibration along the conveyor settles and hardens the mixture and the walled surfaces are polished. The walls are then heated in an oven-like process. The entire operation takes from two to eight hours. Light weight sand is used. The aim is to find the lightest materials with the strongest and most lasting qualities able to withstand Russian winters as well as intense heat.

Housing construction in the Soviet Union (and all building) is organized and conducted by huge "combinats" which combine manufacture and assembly. There are 3 such combinats in Moscow. The work of laying the foundation is done by specialized organizations whose work is also coordinated by the combinat. The advantages of this industrialized, unified method of construction have proven themselves. The Soviet Union's unmatched, unceasing construction would be unthinkable, in terms of speed and cost, without it. Unlike in our country, where the cost of construction has skyrocketed to such a point that it has priced housing beyond the reach of most of our people (it rose 118 per cent from 1949 to 1969), housing costs in the Soviet Union are being steadily reduced. And this is not at the expense of the workers, through speedup resulting in increased accidents, as is the case in our construction industry.

In a later chapter I shall describe the safety precautions which have made labor in the Soviet Union the safest in the world. On construction,

as everywhere, the word of the union and the job safety committee is law and no work is done without their O.K. The Soviet Union's construction costs are lower because, among other things, besides savings resulting from the industrialized method, there are no profiteers to skim off the cream in the form of huge profits, there are no padded, under-the-table contract deals, and, of course, as I noted earlier, no one has to pay exorbitant prices to parasitic real estate hogs for a piece of land. The real estate industry in the U.S. itself estimates that profits, financing and high land prices account for 44 per cent of the price of a new house.

Notwithstanding all its basic advantages, there are serious problems in Soviet construction. These are openly admitted and are the subject of sharp discussion in the Soviet press. I heard some pointed criticism on this score at the 24th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In the report of the Central Committee to the Congress, Leonid Brezhnev, general secretary of the Party, bluntly noted among the major shortcomings in construction: "Plan and financial discipline are sometimes violated. Insufficient use is made of new effective materials and building elements. The quality of construction remains poor." It's on the latter point that a particularly sharp struggle is being waged. In the four years that I have been here I have noted the improvements in the quality of the new housing I see arising daily not only in Moscow but in all Soviet cities I have visited.

Soviet architects will be the first to admit that the problem of combining mass produced housing with variety--in a word, beauty with utility--is a very difficult and complex one. One must add to that the pressure of long pent-up critical housing needs. For the 25 million made homeless by the war as well as the millions of families living in rooms and sharing communal

kitchens, the overriding need was speed, speed and more speed in construction. You can see some of the results of this pressure, as well as of inexperience, in the early prefabricated apartment buildings. They were pointed out to me in Vilnius by my genial host and colleague, Domas Snuikas, of Tiesa, Soviet Lithuania's principal daily newspaper. "Our first pancakes in the batch," Snuikas called them. And "first pancakes" is what they look like in Vilnius and all other Soviet cities. Box-like, poorly finished and monotonous in uniformity, they hardly graced Old Vilnius. The "second batch" was a vast improvement. (Vilnius received a Soviet award for its "second batch.") The finishing was already smoother, the designs more attractive and the beginnings of variety in form were already discernible. The "third" and latest batch is now appearing in increasing numbers in all Soviet cities. It is the culmination of years of effort and experience in the struggle to combine beauty and utility.

There is still far to go in this respect but the progress is unmistakable. Monotonous uniformity is beginning to give ground to variety. The basis for this, as was explained to me by Abram I. Birger, head of Moscow's experimental designing bureau, is the panel system, which allows for flexibility in housing construction. Panel units can, like blocks in a child's set, be positioned in an innumerable variety of ways. Rooms are also more attractive and comfortable, with all modern conveniences. The progress made is attested to by the praise of U.S. architects. Scott Ferebee, President of the American Institute of Architects, who visited the Soviet Union in December 1972, said that he was impressed by the major qualitative changes in Soviet town building in recent years.

More stress is also being placed on higher rise buildings--9 to 12 stories, and lately 25 stories in Moscow. There are economic factors

as well as transportation problems behind this. Larger units are more economical and land can be used more rationally. Spread-out cities like Moscow tax transportation facilities. A walk in Moscow or many other Soviet cities will personally hit home to you the expansive character of Soviet cities. No one here has to sing the refrain, "give me room, lots of room, don't fence me in." You have lots of room--a little too much to make it easy to get around. And it's quite a job for the subways and busses to keep pace with the construction of what amounts to little cities in the big city. The aim is to save time for workers to get to and from work--the goal is no more than 30 minutes' ride.

Contrary to the false picture of a propertyless population under socialism, Soviet citizens can and do own their own homes. But, under Soviet law, they can't use their property to exploit tenants. Soviet citizens are permitted to build one or two-story private homes with generally not more than five rooms. They are allotted plots

of land by the state permanently, free of charge. Such individual private homes are quite widespread in rural areas and small towns, and they constitute one-third of the total housing. I came across these private homes in all the republics I visited. In addition to state assistance, these homes, which compare very favorably with our own workers' and farmers' homes, are usually built by collective or state farm construction organizations and they are provided loans at rates that any American would jump at with joy--about 2 per cent interest. Some collective farms which I visited did not charge any interest.

Compare this with the financing costs U.S. home owners are well familiar with. U.S. News and World Report, March 17, 1969, reported that new homeowners have to pay "8 per cent or more a year in interest and service charges." Thus, it points out: "If a house costs $20,000 and you get a $19,000 mortgage at the 8 per cent rate for 30 years, you will end up paying $31,206 for interest alone by the time you get the loan paid off." (My emphasis--M. D.).

In the Soviet Union considerable assistance is provided for those who desire and can afford to buy cooperative apartments. Cooperative apartment buildings (about 6-7 per cent of the housing) are organized by enterprises, institutions and executive committees of the soviets (councils) in cities and rural areas. Here is how it works. A cooperative member makes an advance payment of 40 per cent of the cost of his apartment. One half of one per cent is paid in interest on the state loan. This is payable in equal instalments over a ten to 15 year period. Local authorities allocate the ground space to the cooperative free of charge. When the full payment (the period depends on the tenant) for the apartment is made, the member only pays the maintenance cost which is about 15 rubles a month for a three room apartment (the kitchen is not count-

ed). Until then, the member pays about 35-40 rubles a month rent. Unlike with our cooperatives, there are no rent or maintenance increases. Cooperative housing has helped cut down the waiting period.

To sum up, Soviet construction is well on the road to solving the housing problem for the entire population--something never before even attempted by any society or country. It is acquiring increasing know-how on the problem faced by all mass-production countries--that of combining beauty and utility. Moreover, as I shall describe in a subsequent chapter, no country in the world can compare with the Soviet Union in the painstaking care and expenditures of effort and money to preserve the architectural heritages of its past. For the multinational USSR this means literally preserving the national flavor of 100 peoples. All this not only makes for cities of comfort but of charm. This is the physical structure of cities without crisis.

Soviet housing is much more than bricks and concrete. It is trees and greenery. No one here could write a book like "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn." I'm not speaking now of the parks which occupy so much of their cities' areas. Moscow, for example, has 20 square meters of greenery per person, its surrounding environs bring it up to 30. Kiev is a city within a park. I'm referring to the little parks that make up the "back yards," courtyards of Soviet cities. Every cluster of houses has one. It consists of a wooded area with park benches where one can rest and relax and children can play. Part of the duties of the maintenance workers are to keep these areas in proper condition. Just the sight of the trees provides Soviet urban dwellers with relief from the oppressiveness of brick and concrete which New Yorkers are never free from. Trees can form a natural part of the Soviet housing scene because they constitute a natural element in the planning

of housing construction. What U.S. landlord or real estate baron, who calculates not only every inch of ground but of air space in terms of cost and profits, would dream of taking trees into his calculations? Soviet housing grows with the city. It is part of a carefully thought-out plan whose aim is convenience, comfort and culture brought to where people live. When new areas go up--and they are springing up rapidly--nurseries, schools, polyclinics, cinemas, sports fields, stores, all go with them. The name given to these "little cities within a city" is micro-areas. Our suburban areas, constructed for the more affluent who are running away from our cities, partly resemble them, but only in outward appearance. The difference is that none of the facilities accompany the new areas to "live off" them, as in the U.S., but to service them.

Maintenance and Repairs Under Socialism

But, the reader may justly ask: what about maintenance and repair of buildings and apartments? In our landlord-owned buildings, especially in ghetto slum areas, a guerrilla war between landlord and tenant is fought over every housing improvement. The abandoned buildings mentioned earlier stand as mute but damning evidence of the social destructiveness of that struggle. My Moscow neighbors listened to me incredulously when I described to them the perennial battles tenants in the U.S. wage with their anonymous absentee landlords for heat, repairs, protection from fires, and to rid their homes of rats and roaches. Rats and roaches are not now major problems in most of Moscow. Some still cling to the as yet sizable number of very old houses. As for the shrieking sounds of fire trucks so familiar in New York, I have only on rare occasions heard them in Moscow. We were not too long here when we suddenly realized that this, too, was

"missing." Not that Moscow has no fires--we have since witnessed one or two. As I describe Moscow's maintenance organization (and the setup is similar in all Soviet cities), the reasons for this will become apparent.

Neither is the fight against winter a bitter tug-of-war between tenant and landlord. It is a common battle against cold led by the city Soviets and an elaborate housing organization. The severe Russian winters are made comfortable indoors by the vast city central heating system that warms every home. As for repairs, buildings are not permitted to deteriorate into slums. The concept of buildings as private property, which can be neglected when they are no longer profitable, is completely alien to the Soviet people. They have been brought up to regard and respect their buildings and their apartments as socialist property, belonging to the entire people. Thus, the responsibility for maintenance and repair is generally regarded by Soviet tenants, and the vast organizations servicing them, as a mutual one.

I am familiar with this not only through extensive study during which I visited the Moscow housing organization on all levels, but also as a tenant in an apartment building in which ours is the only foreign family. To begin with, the size and scope of Moscow's housing setup in itself denotes the care and consideration to tenants' needs that would be unthinkable in our country. Moscow's government-owned buildings are maintained and serviced by an army of 100,000 workers: mechanics, electricians, carpenters, painters, plumbers, roofers, etc. (This does not include those who service the cooperative buildings.)

Here is how the setup is organized and how it functions. Each of Moscow's 30 districts has its maintenance department, commonly referred to by its initials, ZHEKH. I spent a day with ZHEKH in the Kalinin district. What I saw was the kind of an organization our long-suffering tenants have

long been yearning and struggling for. I would strongly urge that our tenants' organizations visit the Soviet Union and arrange tenant tours of ZHEKH. It would hit home to them how pleasant life without landlords can be. Only a social system that views housing as a public service rather than a means for extracting exorbitant rent could lavish this kind of service on tenants. Just consider this fact: Kalinin's 4,000 tenants living in 1,433 apartments are serviced by a staff of 167 full-time workers. For purposes of efficiency and closer contact with residents, ZHEKH is subdivided into six branch offices, each headed by a tekhnik-smotretel (supervisor). Each branch office services 9-10 apartment buildings (usually 4-5 buildings in more densely populated areas).

Here let me stop my organizational description to acquaint you with our tekhnik-smotretel, Alla. Our family fell in love with Alla, who came some years ago to Moscow from a small village near the industrial Ural city of Sverdlovsk. A warm-hearted, attractive woman in her thirties, Alla and her two small children have been constant visitors to our home even after she left her position to take another, more advanced one. Alla got quite attached to my wife, Gail. She simply refused to recognize language as a barrier. We were hardly here a month when she started talking Russian to Gail, who stared at her blankly. But Alla, in her version of the Berlitz method, patiently and cheerfully, daily poured out her expressive Russian as if Gail understood every word. Alla managed a staff of 22 (for three New York-size apartment buildings), which included two mechanics, one electrician, one carpenter, six janitors whose job it is to keep the area around the building clean and in good order, eight cleaning women who are responsible for the interior of the buildings, and four women who watch over the operation of the elevators.

Alla directed her staff with her natural good

nature but with firmness also. I saw her admonish men for failure to carry out a job in time without raising her voice or dropping her kind smile. I watched her as she presided over house committee meetings or listened to tenants' complaints with the same patience, earnestness and kindness. The results were evident in the neat, orderly condition of the building and the attentiveness to complaints. Alla, a child during the war, nevertheless, like many of her generation I met, felt its effects. Her school was disrupted and life around her was not the most conducive to studying, especially in a small village. And now a mother of two children, Alla first started to go to a construction institute. It proved a little too much for her to handle. So, like many others, she found the evening correspondence courses more practical. (These evening courses are a way of life here.) Alla is determined to become a construction engineer. I am convinced she will, from the many Allas I met who now make up so large a part of the engineering staffs everywhere I visited.

And now to get back to the Kalinin district and its ZHEKH. The Soviet Union lives by plan. And ZHEKH is no exception. Kalinin's ZHEKH has its One Year and Five Year Plans. It has its seasonal as well as long range objectives. The yearly plan is worked out during October-November, on the basis of apartment-by-apartment visits to determine specific needs, and on the basis of close consultation with house committees made up of tenants. Winter plans begin every September 1. Russian winter is no joke--though the winter of 1971 was not as severe as usual--and demands early and thorough preparation. Every household seals its windows with paper strips well ahead of the expected wintry blasts. But winterizing is the responsibility of ZHEKH and its subdivisions. It must see to it that the heating system is in good order, windows properly seal-

ed, floors and roofs in good condition. The tasks are also intense in preparation for spring and summer. The ravages of winter place demands on maintenance and repair that are far greater than in our temperate climate. Climate, I have come to better appreciate, plays a considerable role in the problems it raises in respect to every aspect of social life. With most of its vast territory in areas affected to varying degrees by severe winters, the Soviet Union in its industrial, agricultural and transportation plans, as well as in respect to housing and maintenance, faces considerably more difficult problems than we do. I dread to think what it would be like if we had to face Russian winters under our landlord setup, or in what condition our homes and apartment buildings would be after they had gone through one. Spring in Moscow and in most Soviet cities means much more than a cleaning. It means repairing--particularly the outside walls of buildings. That's why it's a common sight to see workers on skeleton-like scaffolds, many of them women, filling in cracks with cement. You see workers perched on roofs and balconies clearing them of ice that could be dangerous to passersby.

Repairs are in keeping with the preventative approach that guides every aspect of Soviet social living. You prevent sickness and you forestall or delay decay. The regulations are all written into law. We, too, have laws. So the reader may ask: So, what? The answer is just this. There's no one here to bribe inspectors to look the other way. And most important of all--there's no one here to save on repairs. Where problems do exist--and this largely pertains to minor household repairs--they come from the neglect of individual maintenance workers.

Fire hazards have been reduced to a minimum because, among other reasons, electric wiring, a major cause of fires in big cities in the U.S., is regularly checked and repaired (all new

buildings, of course, are fireproof). Another important contributing factor: heating is piped from a central source instead of being produced in thousands of hazardous furnaces. This does away with explosions, too.

Incidentally, just as Soviet factories are much more than places to work, Soviet homes are more than places to live. They are centers of educational, cultural and sports activities--all supervised by ZHEKH. Each local area has its Red Corner for the children where they are taught to dance and sing and are organized into amateur groups. Each ZHEKH has its people's court, composed of the tenants themselves, which settles local grievances arising among the tenants. It can impose fines.

All housing in Moscow (and in all Soviet cities) must undergo capital repairs at least every three years. These include plumbing, central heating, floors, etc. These are in addition to routine repairs whenever necessary. Buildings must be completely restored from the inside out, every 30 years.

As if this were not enough, Moscow has an elaborate setup for emergency repairs. There are 30 stations--one for each district. I visited the one in the October district. Here is what I saw: huge cranes, mobile repair stations, 30 trucks, fire fighting equipment and bulldozers. The station is fully equipped to handle any emergency, around the clock--for this purpose it has 66 workers. In addition, the October station has a staff of 230 workers to handle all kinds of major repairs.

The work of this emergency setup is made considerably easier by the system of regular inspection that is a way of life here: every three months for general and fire inspection and every month for gas check-up.

Incidentally, check-up is not only carried out by regular official inspection but also by tenant

house committees. These committees play an important and necessary role, not only in inspection but also in keeping maintenance workers on their toes. They listen to complaints and act on them. The maintenance worker at fault is deprived of his bonus, and good work is rewarded by higher bonuses.

However, maintenance is not considered solely the responsibility of the maintenance workers. Tenants, in the main, have a collective, socialist attitude toward buildings, which after all belong to them as well as to Soviet society. They are held responsible for leaving their apartments in good condition when they move, and for cleanliness and care of buildings. What incentive have our tenants, especially in ghetto slums, to view as their own, property which is not even treated with respect by its landlord owners?

Service workers, too, have no landlord to tell them to skimp on heat or stall on repairs. Nor are they, as in the U.S., underpaid and overworked. And they do not, as in our country, also have to bear the brunt of abused tenants' frustrations, in addition to everything else. Unlike our maintenance workers, who are largely unorganized, they are 100 percent unionized and enjoy all the rights and benefits of all Soviet workers: free medical care, 24 day vacation (the union pays for 70 percent of it), full sick benefits, retirement pensions for men at 60 and women at 55. Like our tekhnik-smotretel, Alla, they can go to special technical schools to raise their skills (two days a week with full pay). Maintenance technical schools and institutes are training a sizable corps of workers and technicians to make homes the comfortable pleasant places they are meant to be.

I don't want to give the reader the impression that Soviet tenants face no serious problems. No setup, even one that is so oriented towards providing tenants with the utmost in services, is

self-regulating. The Allas, in the main, typify the worker of the maintenance organization. But I've met others who were hardly as conscientious or responsible. I have come across neglect and delay in the handling of repairs and in responding to complaints, notwithstanding the vast army of workers charged with the responsibility of servicing Moscow's apartments. And frankly, it is irritating, as it is anywhere. It calls forth the justifiable wrath of Soviet tenants. But there is a vast difference between fighting your landlord and combating inefficiency and indifference of some maintenance workers. The landlord's neglect is deliberate. It is motivated by his economic interests which are in conflict with those of his tenants. Less services mean more profits. The neglect and delay in handling complaints we met in the Soviet Union stem from human deficiencies, lack of a conscientious attitude toward the job on the part of some maintenance workers, poor organization and particularly, poor direction of individual housing units and ZHEKH. They are also the result of an insufficient supply of parts.

Soviet tenants do not come up against the stone-wall resistance of the landlord backed by the entire legal and social structure of a society that places profits above people. They face no City Hall bureaucracy, no landlord-biased courts to smother their complaints and frustrate their efforts. On the contrary, the struggle against inefficiency and an indifferent attitude to one's work is waged by the entire Soviet society, all levels of government, the Communist Party, the press, radio and T.V. It is a vital element in the fight for a Communist attitude toward labor. But Soviet tenants also have effective instruments at hand which they are not at all hesitant in using. First of all, there are the housing committees which meet regularly and check on the work of the maintenance organization. Then, there are the people's control units, largely made up of the

more civic-conscious retired workers who exercise a check-up over all aspects of public services, including housing. Then, there is the check-up by the maintenance organization itself. Thus, with all their problems, tenants in the U.S. would consider themselves fortunate beyond their greatest hopes if they would enjoy only a fraction of the services provided to Soviet tenants.

Cities Without Segregation

A final word on "life without landlords." On December 21, 1965 I wrote an article for The Worker (predecessor of the Daily World) on the massive study of ghetto slums made in 1965 under the direction of the New York City Planning Commission, entitled New York City's Renewal Strategy. Here is how that study described the status of ghetto segregation: "A person living in the center of Bedford-Stuyvesant must travel at least a mile to reach an area that is not occupied predominantly by Black people." The same can be said of Black, Puerto Rican and Chicano areas in cities all over the U.S.

In the four years that I've walked the streets of Moscow and numerous other cities in 14 Republics, I never came across any racial or national ghettos. I never came upon slums or "poor neighborhoods." I saw old, run-down houses--the heritage of the past that is rapidly being eliminated--but no areas such as our cities abound in (especially for Black and other minorities) where the underprivileged live. No district in Moscow or in any Soviet city can be identified by race or nationality. Even in cities in the Republics where, of course, citizens of that particular nation or nationality predominate, this is true. In Alma Ata (Kazakhstan) for example, Russians, Ukrainians and other national groups live side by side with Kazakhs and Uigurs. In Moscow, Kiev and Odessa there are large numbers of Jews, but

I never once came across a "Jewish neighborhood." There are no "poor" neighborhoods because there are no poor, no underprivileged.

Though, under socialism, there are those of higher income, you can never tell by the neighborhoods they live in. There are no slums because there are no slumlords. Thus, the buildings as well as those living in them are respected and cared for. There are no ghettos because racism and national discrimination which create and profit from them have long been eliminated. Nothing more distinguishes Soviet cities from our own than the absence of these social sores that, above all, have made our urban centers sick cities, cities of crisis. No Soviet citizens return from a day's work to depressing areas circumscribed by their class position or the color of their skins. The place one lives in, in our "free enterprise" society, determines far more than just family living quarters. As the New York Times of June 5, 1969, quoting the President's Committee on Urban Housing, points out, the place someone in the U.S. lives in "is a symbol of his status, an extension of his personality, a part of his identity, a determinant of many of the benefits and disadvantages of society that will come to him and his family: schooling, police protection, municipal services, neighborhood environment, access (or lack of access) to a hundred possibilities of life and culture." In other words, where one lives in our free enterprise society determines how one lives. All this is wrapped up in the class character of our housing. This is the essence of ghetto slum living.

Soviet society, which has eliminated class exploitation and racial and national discrimination, has eliminated with it this "status symbol" in housing. This is what has made Soviet cities the most truly democratic in the world. This is the meaning of "life without landlords!"

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